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# COMMUNICATION AMONG EMERGING ADULT SIBLINGS

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Communication Graduate Program  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

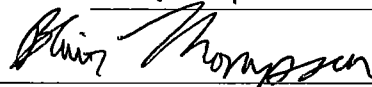
By  
Jessica Leigh Paulsen

May 2013

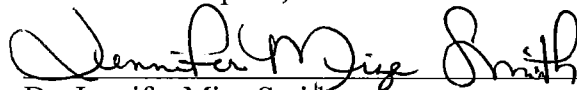
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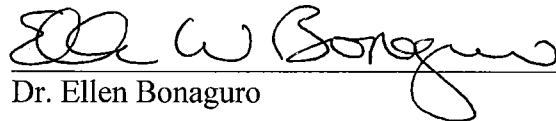
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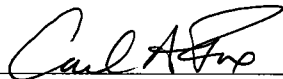
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## COMMUNICATION AMONG EMERGING ADULT SIBLINGS

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Directed by Blair Thompson; Jennifer Mize Smith; and Ellen Bonaguro

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The study sought to explore the emerging adult sibling dyad through qualitative inquiry. By doing so, the collected data bring new meaning to why and how emerging adult siblings communicate. Also, by including both siblings, this study sought to highlight a different perspective of sibling communication. Extant research on the emerging adulthood stage of life is limited. The current study explored the sibling dyad during this phase of life, and three themes emerged: siblings become friends, changes during emerging adulthood, conflict negotiation, and taking a parental role.

*Key terms: Emerging Adulthood; Siblings; Relationship Maintenance Behaviors; Conflict*

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Communication Among Emerging Adult Siblings**

The sibling relationship is one of the most widespread of all interpersonal relationships (Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2007). Apart from parents, siblings generally have the longest relationship in a person's life. Ponzettie and James (1997) considered the sibling relationship "to be the longest lasting relationship most individuals experience" (p. 104). Parents must find a balance between sibling personalities, rivalries, and relationships. The sibling relationship holds "great significance as a contributor to family harmony and disharmony" (Brody, 1998, p. 2). As children mature, the sibling relationship evolves. Siblings can choose how to communicate and act towards each other, and the struggle to find balance of family harmony and disharmony falls more heavily on the siblings' shoulders.

Communication within the sibling relationship is unique (Myers, 1998). According to Rocca, Martin, and Dunleavy (2010), "Although people have no choice in selecting their siblings, people do decide, especially once they reach adulthood, how, when, and why they communicate with their sibling" (p. 214). From childhood to adolescence, siblings are forced to communicate with one another in the family setting. Circirelli (1995) described the sibling relationship as "ascribed, rather than an earned" (p. 2) relationship because it will continue through the lifespan. However, when siblings enter emerging adulthood, begin college, and/or move away from the parental home, they must make an active choice to communicate with their siblings.



This study focuses on communication within the sibling relationship of emerging adults, which Arnett (2004) described as the period spanning from late teens to late twenties. Emerging adulthood is a time of “independent exploration” when most young people do not perceive themselves as reaching adulthood status (i.e. marriage, parenthood) (Arnett, 2004, p. B4). During the emerging adulthood stage of life, siblings are individually gaining independence from the parental unit as well as from the sibling relationship. Moving away from adolescence and toward adulthood, the college years mark a time of maturing and gaining self-identity (Myers & Rittenour, 2011). For most siblings, college is the first experience of living away from the parental home and siblings. Without the parental home providing an environment prone to constant interaction, emerging adult siblings must choose when, how, and why to communicate.

People are motivated to communicate for different reasons. Graham, Barbato, and Perse (1993) found that people are more motivated to talk to a spouse/lover, family member, or friend for pleasure, affection, and inclusion over a stranger or coworker. This study seeks to better understand the motivations to communicate for emerging adult siblings.

Siblings use relational maintenance behaviors to fulfill their motivations for communication. Myers (2011) found seven reasons why adult siblings choose to maintain their relationships: “we are family,” “we provide each other support,” “we share similar or common interests and experiences,” “we are friends,” “I love my sibling,” “we are relationally close,” and “we live close to each other” (p. 55). This study seeks to grasp how emerging adult siblings describe their use of relational maintenance behaviors.

Over the course of any sibling relationship, conflict is bound to arise. Through childhood, it is common for parents to step in to resolve the issue, but sibling rivalry and disputes continue into adolescence (Siddiqui & Ross, 1999). However, Bedford and Volling (2000) found that adults benefit from childhood conflicts. Adult siblings identified better parenting skills, social competence, improved sibling relationships, and a greater sense of self. Further research is needed to discover how the sibling relationship changes through the emerging adulthood stage.

Despite rivalries and conflicts, siblings maintain communication satisfaction and commitment. White and Reidmann (1992) found that two-thirds of adult respondents considered a sibling to be a close friend. Those close friend sibling relationships are built through disclosure. Martin, Mottet, and Anderson (1997) found that the more siblings perceived to be understood, the more likely they were to give honest self-disclosures to each other. To continue a close friend sibling relationships, siblings must have some level of commitment.

The level of commitment can determine how siblings maintain their relationship. Myers and Rittenour (2011) found commitment to be one significant predictor of openness, assurances, networks, tasks, conflict management, and advice within emerging adult sibling relationships. The context of emerging adulthood can change the level of communication satisfaction and commitment in the sibling relationship. This study seeks to find how this specific context might change communication between emerging adult siblings.

Past research has been conducted to examine childhood (Ram & Ross, 2008) and adolescent (Raffaelli, 1997) sibling relationships. Research has also studied adult sibling

relationships (Pulakos, 1987), but the brief time period of emerging adulthood has not been examined to its full extent. The purpose of this study is to explore the sibling relationships of emerging adults with particular emphasis on communication motivation, relationship maintenance, strategies including conflict resolution, and siblings' feelings of communication satisfaction and relational commitment.

Specific calls for future research have been made which this study pursues. The current study strives to fulfill the request for further research on the frequency, depth, and breadth with regard to commitment within in sibling relationship (Rittenour et al., 2007). Also, this study offers additional understanding to sibling research by fulfilling the call for further research using both siblings in a sibling dyad (Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006; Beven & Stetzanbach, 2007; Myers, Cavanaugh, Dohmen, Freeh, Huang, Kapler,...Wise, 1999; Myers & Bryant, 2008; Rocca & Martin, 1998; Rocca et al., 2010).

The study brings both pragmatic and methodological contributions to the field of communication. Pragmatically, it brings further understanding of emerging adult siblings' perception of their communication. Methodologically, it added to the current quantitative research by providing qualitative data.

The research project is comprised of five chapters. This chapter offered an introduction and rationale for the specific area of study. Chapter two includes extant research on emerging adulthood, relationship maintenance, motivation to communicate, commitment, communication satisfaction, and conflict. The third chapter explains the qualitative design of the proposed study. Chapter four provides study research findings through emerged themes and participant quotations. Finally, the fifth chapter provides a

discussion and explanation of the findings, offers theoretical and pragmatic implications, and presents limitations and future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter begins with a review of literature pertaining to relational maintenance behaviors within general interpersonal relationships and within sibling relationships specifically. Next, emerging adulthood literature is presented along with literature involving motivation to communicate, relationship commitment, and communication satisfaction. This chapter also discusses communication in conflict situations. Last, literature related to gender and birth order is presented. Research questions arise from an interest in how the emerging adulthood context shapes sibling communication.

#### **Relationship Maintenance Behaviors**

Myers and Goodboy (2010) discussed seven relationship maintenance behaviors that occur within interpersonal relationships: assurances, openness, conflict management, tasks, positivity, advice, and networks. They used Gold's typology of relationships; the researchers found the behaviors were determined by whether the participants identified their sibling relationship as intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, or hostile. Intimate siblings used relational maintenance behaviors more than any other sibling type, followed by congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile (Myers & Goodboy, 2010).

Siblings are strategic when using maintenance behaviors (Myers, Byrnes, Frisby, & Mansson, 2011). Relational maintenance strategies are conducted through affectionate communication. Myers et al. (2011) discovered two purposes for strategically utilizing affectionate communication. First, siblings desired to reduce relational uncertainty. Once siblings enter adulthood, they do not spend as much time together as they once did during

adolescence; siblings may express affection to reduce some of the uncertainty caused by the decrease in time spent together. Second, the siblings held a genuine interest in the relationship. Siblings used affectionate communication, but they also use relational maintenance behaviors specific to the sibling relationship.

The relationship type also influenced the type of communication channel that was used. People in intimate sibling relationships used the telephone more than any other sibling type. Both intimate and congenial siblings used face-to-face communication and text messages more than loyal, apathetic, or hostile siblings (Myers & Goodboy, 2010). The type of relationship determines what, if any, maintenance behaviors will be used along with the communication channels. This study attempts to obtain a deeper understanding of why siblings are intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, or hostile and how they displayed their relationship type through relational maintenance behaviors.

Myers and Weber (2004) found six behaviors specific to the sibling relationship: confirmation, humor, social support, family visits, escape, and verbal aggression. All but verbal aggression had a positive correlation with sibling liking, commitment, and trust within the relationship. The more siblings used relationship maintenance behaviors, the higher their levels of liking, trust, and commitment to the relationship.

Similarly, Myers et al. (1999) found that equality, similarity, and receptivity were significant predictors of sibling liking and sibling loving. It could be understood that siblings will like and/or love each other more when the relationship is equal, similar, and open. Equality, receptivity, immediacy, similarity, and composure were all significant predictors of sibling communication satisfaction. The level of communication satisfaction in the sibling relationship was found to be substantially linked to the level of sibling

liking and sibling loving. So, the more satisfied siblings are in their communication, the more they like and/or love their sibling.

The studies discussed thus far have researched sibling communication and relational maintenance behaviors from a quantitative standpoint. This study seeks to discover how siblings described their relational maintenance behaviors through qualitative research methods. Specifically, the study answers the following research question:

RQ1: How, if at all, do emerging adult siblings describe their use of relationship maintenance behaviors with their siblings?

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is a new stage of life that has emerged in our society. It is a bridge between adolescence and young adulthood that is “historically unprecedented” that will affect generations to come (Arnett, 2004, p. B4). In today’s society, reaching adulthood is determined by several factors.

The move from adolescence into adulthood is characterized by many criteria. Arnett (2001) found that individuals in adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young-to-midlife adulthood agreed on five criteria to reach adulthood: individualism (i.e. financially, responsibility for actions), family capacity and norm compliance (i.e. being mindful of others), and legal/chronological (i.e. age markers—16, 18, 21) and role transitions (i.e. marriage, parenthood, full-time employment). Further, Arnett (2001) found that 50% of emerging adults were uncertain if they met all five criteria of adulthood status. They believed in some ways they had met certain criteria, but in some ways they had not yet met all of them. The novelty of this period of time in a person’s

life may change how one communicates within the sibling relationship. This study focuses on the sibling relationship within the context of emerging adulthood. Due to the uniqueness of this particular stage of life, further research is needed to conclude how communication between siblings is affected in this context.

**Motivation to communicate.** As siblings move from adolescence to emerging adulthood, they are no longer under the parental environment or in constant contact with their siblings. Communication is no longer a necessity but a choice. Siblings will inevitably communicate with one another, but why? Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988) identified six motives for interpersonal communication: pleasure, affection, relaxation, inclusion, control, and escape. After studying Rubin and colleagues' (1988) findings of motives and behavior in the sibling relationship, Myers, Brann, and Rittenour (2008) found positive correlations between the use of interpersonal communication motives and the use of relational maintenance behaviors among siblings in early-middle adulthood. Mainly, siblings were motivated by affection and psychological closeness. The more motivation to communicate, the more siblings will enact relational maintenance behaviors.

Beyond general motives to communicate, Rocca et al. (2010) discovered differences in gender. Women were found to communicate more affection within sibling relationships; and there was more motive of inclusion among sister-sister dyads. Similarly, Fowler (2009) reported sisters being motivated to communicate for comfort and by intimacy more than brothers.

Rocca et al. (2010) also found siblings from nonintact families to communicate more for pleasure than siblings from intact families. The older siblings were found to be



motivated by control, whereas the younger siblings were motivated by pleasure, inclusion, and relaxation. The number of siblings also affected the motivation to communicate. If there was only one sibling, there was more motivation to communicate for control. Pleasure and relaxation were motivation for those with multiple siblings.

As the sibling relationship changes with time, the motivations to communicate may change. Fowler (2009) conducted a study across a lifespan with participants ranging from 18-65+ years old. Specific to this study, participants in the 18-34 age range were more motivated by control/escape than any other age group. The relationship satisfaction was also predicted by the various motives. For those 18-34, relational satisfaction was predicted through intimacy, obligation, and mutuality.

Several motives have been identified, varying by age, birth order, and gender. Qualitative inquiry should be conducted to provide better understanding of the emerging adult sibling's motivation to communicate. Along with motivation, commitment should also be further studied.

**Commitment.** Siblings will remain committed to each other. No matter the type (intimate, congenial, etc.) of relationship, Rittenour et al. (2007) found that “commitment is stable across a lifespan” (p. 175). Siblings who remain emotionally and affectionately supportive will be committed in spite of barriers (i.e. geographical distance). Birth order was also found to affect sibling relational commitment, similar to the findings by Rocca et al. (2010).

Myers and Bryant (2008) found 11 behaviors through which siblings express commitment: tangible support, emotional support, informational support, esteem support, network support, everyday talk, shared activities, verbal expressions, nonverbal

expressions, protection, and intimate play (p. 116). Protection was found to be the most frequently used behavioral indicator of commitment. All but intimate play were directly related to relational and communication satisfaction; emotional and network support along with shared activities were predictors of relational and communication satisfaction. Through showing commitment in different ways, siblings can affect the level of relational and communication satisfaction.

The findings from these studies display various reasons why siblings are committed and how that commitment is expressed. However, further research is needed to explore commitment between emerging adult siblings and how that commitment is expressed. The level of communication satisfaction in the sibling relationship may determine how commitment is expressed.

**Communication satisfaction.** Myers (1998) posed a study to find how interpersonal solidarity, individualized trust, and self-disclosure were related to communication satisfaction. The results indicated all three were positive predictors of communication satisfaction. It can be believed that the more siblings feel unified, trust each other, and disclose information the more they will be satisfied with the communication in the relationship.

The willingness to communicate also plays a role in the sibling relationship. Rocca and Martin (1998) discovered as siblings' willingness to communicate rose, the greater breadth and depth of topics they discussed and there was higher frequency of sibling communication. The same positive relationship was found to be true with interpersonal solidarity. It can be understood that not only does solidarity lead to more

communication satisfaction, but also to greater depth and breadth of topics discussed and frequency of communication.

There are specific aspects of a sibling relationship that can decrease communication satisfaction and may lead to topic avoidance. Siblings who perceived more verbal aggressiveness tended to have reduced communication satisfaction along with trust and sibling credibility (Martin, Anderson, & Rocca, 2005). However, siblings who perceived increased credibility were inclined to have more communication satisfaction and sibling trust. According to Martin, et al. (2005) jealousy and uncertainty lead to sibling verbal aggression, mistrust, and decreased credibility.

Even among adult siblings, jealousy remains in the relationship. Most adult siblings use avoidance communication strategies to deal with jealousy. However, for those who use integrative communication (i.e. constructive, direct responses), the communication satisfaction increased (Bevan & Stetzenbach, 2007). Adult siblings also experience partner and relational uncertainty. Partner uncertainty is experienced more, but both types may lead to topic avoidance (Bevan et al., 2006). Research showed no difference by gender, however daily or weekly contact lead to less uncertainty than monthly communication or several times over a year.

For the emerging adult sibling relationship, studies have shown that solidarity, trust, self-disclosure, willingness to communicate, jealousy, and uncertainty are all variables impacting communication satisfaction (Bevan & Stetzenbach, 2007; Martin et al., 2005; Myers, 1998; Rocca & Martin, 1998); however these previous studies have not enabled the voice of the sibling to be heard. Similarly, motivation to communicate and

relational commitment do not provide qualitative understanding in the emerging adulthood sibling context.

In this unique time of life, the emerging adult siblings are experiencing independence and self exploration. They no longer are forced to see their sibling on a daily basis in the parental home. This study seeks to understand what motivates emerging adult siblings to communicate, how they feel and express commitment, and their satisfaction with the communication in their sibling relationship. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How does the context of emerging adulthood change the communication between siblings?

### **Conflict**

The sibling relationship begins to withstand conflict from an early age. As children, the sibling relationship will remain intact even if conflict arises, unlike friendships (Cutting & Dunn, 2006). Through the adolescent years, siblings hold conflicts regarding invasion of the personal domain along with equality and fairness, or the lack thereof (Campionne-Barr & Smetana, 2010). Differences in birth order and gender were also found. Older siblings reported more conflict in general, specifically more conflict of personal domain, than younger siblings. Same-sex dyads were closer than mix-paired dyads, sister-sister relationships being closer than brother-brother (Campionne-Barr & Smetana, 2010). The perception of conflicts within the sibling dyad may differ depending on the birth order and gender. For example, the older sibling may perceive the younger sibling as invading personal space by entering his/her bedroom, but the younger sibling perceives the action as trying to bond with the older sibling.

To deal with conflict, siblings enact different communication strategies: integrative, distributive, or avoidant (Pawlowski, Myers, & Rocca, 2000). Siblings communicating immediacy, similarity, receptivity, composure, and equality tended to use integrative strategies. The more involved siblings were in the relationship, the less they used distributive or avoidant strategies. However, Pawlowski et al. (2000) called for more research to be done on sibling conflict. Therefore, the following research question is presented:

RQ3: How do emerging adult siblings communicate through conflict?

### **Birth Order and Gender**

Overall, common threads emerged from past research studies. Studies found differences in gender and birth order changed the dynamics of a sibling relationship. Floyd and Parks (1995), when looking at friend and sibling relationships, found several differences in relational closeness for men and women. Women, more than men, reported disclosing and interactions as contributing factors of their relational closeness. Women also reported more satisfaction with their relational closeness.

Similar to Rocca et al. (2010) and Fowler (2009), Pulakos (1987) discovered gender differences in sibling relationships. Women felt closer to their siblings and that the sibling relationship was more important to them than the male participants. Van Volkom, Machiz, and Reich (2011) discovered gender differences among emerging adult siblings. Women were more likely to believe they would be friends with their sibling if they were not related and compare themselves to the sibling closest in age than men.

Birth order differences were also found. Pulakos (1987) found younger siblings to perceive a closer sibling relationship than older siblings. Van Volkom et al.'s (2011)

study showed youngest siblings to compare themselves to the sibling closest in age more than middle or oldest siblings. Along with the research questions previously offered, this study seeks to understand the communication among emerging adults from the perspective of male/female and oldest/youngest sibling. The following research questions are posed:

RQ4: What are the differences, if any, in sibling communication from the oldest/youngest perspective, respectively?

RQ5: What are the differences, if any, in sibling communication from the male/female perspective, respectively?

The next chapter discusses the qualitative methods used to explore these questions.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the methodology of the study is explained. First, a rationale for using a qualitative approach is given. Second, the participants for the study are described. Next, there is an explanation of the data collection and data analysis for the study. Finally, the role of the researcher is provided, along with verification procedures.

#### **Rationale for a Qualitative Approach**

Creswell (1998) considered qualitative inquiry to be “a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). This process is one that “requires a strong commitment to study a problem and demands time and resources” (Creswell, 1998, p. 16). For this study, qualitative research methods were utilized to “explore people’s explanations,” to “gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means,” and to “inquire about the past,” (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 174-175).

Creswell (1998) also believed qualitative inquiry is necessary if “the topic needs to be explored” and there is a “need to present a detailed view of the topic” (p. 17). This study sought to provide a more “complex, holistic picture” of the emerging adult sibling relationship (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Extant research has utilized quantitative methods to study emerging adult siblings, but qualitative inquiry was necessary to provide a new perspective to sibling communication research.

#### **Participants**

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, convenient and snowball sampling was used to recruit 12 participants (6 sibling dyads; 10 females and 2 males)

from a midsize, southern university. Purposeful sampling was utilized by recruiting participants from upper level communication courses. After receiving permission from each professor, the researcher gave a five-minute explanation of the study. A sign-up sheet was passed around for interested students to leave their name, email address, and phone number. Interested students were contacted by the researcher the following week. Snowball sampling was used to recruit the siblings of the university students. Interested students provided their siblings' contact information. Both the student and the sibling had to agree to participate in the study.

To ensure the participants were in the early adulthood stage, participants had to be within an 18-24 age range (one was 18, one was 19, two were 20, four were 21, one was 22, two were 23, one was 24). The difference in age between siblings ranged from 1-4 years (one 1 year difference, two 2 years difference, two 3 years difference, one 4 years difference). There was no limitation to the number of siblings a participant could have, but at least two siblings had to participate in the study to obtain both perspectives of a sibling-dyad's communication.

Three sibling dyads came from a 2-sibling household; one sibling dyad had a 3-sibling household; two sibling dyads came from a 4-sibling household. Siblings had to be living in different housing (i.e. different apartments, different residence halls, etc.). Three of the sibling dyads lived in the same city. Three sibling dyads lived in different cities with an average distance of 4.5 hours. One sibling dyad had a participant who lived with a degenerative disability.

There were no criteria for race/ethnicity (10 white/Caucasian participants; 2 black/African American participants) or family intactness (4 families intact; 2 families



divorced). There was no criterion for biological sibling status (5 dyads were biological siblings; 1 dyad was half siblings). There was no criterion for gender in the sibling dyad; therefore, the dyads could have been a combination of sister-sister, sister-brother, or brother-brother relationships (4 sister-sister dyads; 2 brother-sister dyads). Further, there were five older sisters, one older brother, five younger sisters, and one younger brother.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Creswell (1998) portrayed data collection as “a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 110). For this study, the following steps were taken to collect data. Participants were called or emailed by the researcher to set up a time and location for one-on-one interviews to be conducted. For participants in other cities, phone interviews or Skype interviews were conducted. Upon meeting the participants, rapport was established prior to the interview to ensure the participants were at ease (Lindof & Taylor, 2011). Before the interview began, the informed consent form was reviewed to remind participants the study was voluntary, completely confidential, and would cause no personal harm. Also, the participants were reminded that the interviews would be audio recorded and could be stopped at any time. Interviews “resemble conversations between equals who systematically and collaboratively explore topics of mutual interest” (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, p. 3), through which participants were able to provide thick, rich descriptions of their communication with their sibling.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol of open-ended questions (Lindof & Taylor, 2011) allowing for probing questions to request examples or more detail from the participants. The interview length ranged from

approximately 21-66 minutes with an average of 37 minutes. After all participants were interviewed, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. The transcript lengths ranged from 9-25 pages with an average of 17 pages. A total of 199 double-spaced pages were transcribed. The data were kept confidential; upon study completion, the information was kept in a collegiate professor's locked office in a locked filing cabinet.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Creswell (1998) considered the process of data analysis as a spiral as “the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 142). This study pursued such analysis as discussed by Creswell (1998). Upon transcription completion, the transcripts were read through once in their entirety. Next, meticulous line-by-line open and in vivo coding was exercised to identify specific data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To evaluate and unify the data, comparative coding was employed. Categories were created by relating the data to each other (Saldana, 2009). Twenty-two codes emerged and then were grouped into seven categories. Themes were defined as “an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (Saldana, 2009, p. 13). Themes were determined by recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness as discussed by Owen (1984). Four themes emerged from the data: siblings become friends, changes during emerging adulthood, conflict negotiation, and taking a parental role.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Researcher reflexivity will be addressed to develop validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher is a second-born female with an older brother. The personal

experience of an opposite sex sibling-dyad may provide biases toward participants similar to the researcher. Thus, possible biases toward similar sibling relationships may emerge.

The researcher attended the midsized southern university where the study was conducted. The researcher may have had some interaction with some participants in the past due to being in the same undergraduate programs and activities. However, the researcher attempted to recruit only the participants with no prior interaction for this study.

To avoid these possible biases, the researcher remained neutral with nonverbal reactions during the interviewing process as to not lead the participants in a specific way. The interview protocol was followed to assure consistency across interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Probing questions were administered to gather more detail or specific examples from participants if not provided in the original response.

### **Verification Strategies**

To establish a means to combat the researcher biases, verification procedures were used. Each participant was represented with quotations throughout the findings section; thick rich descriptions allow the reader a better understanding of the participants' perspective (Lindof & Taylor, 2011). Participants were provided with a summary of the findings and asked to provide any comments, concerns, and/or feedback; member checking ensured the participants validated the findings as true and accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Changes were made accordingly. Peer debriefing was performed with two fellow graduate students outside the area of study but who were debriefed on the area of study, the data collection and analysis procedures, and provided the transcripts, master

code list, categories, and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After reading through the study, any comments, changes, or feedback were considered and changes were made accordingly.

The next chapter discusses the major findings. The themes and subthemes are described. Also, data clips are given from each participant to portray the participants' voices from the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter provides the themes, subthemes, and data clips that focus on the participants' voices. Through thorough data analysis, four overarching themes emerged: (a) siblings become friends, (b) changes during emerging adulthood, (c) conflict negotiation, and (d) taking a parental role. Theme one addresses research question one, theme two addresses research question two, theme three addresses research question three, and theme four addresses research question four (see Table 1 for a summary of themes and subthemes). The following section describes the themes and subthemes discovered through the analysis with specific quotations from the participants supporting the findings.

Table 1

*Summary of themes and subthemes*

<b>RQs</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
RQ1: How, if at all, do emerging adult siblings describe their use of relationship maintenance behaviors with their siblings?	1. Siblings become friends	1. My sibling, my bestie 2. Reliance 3. Affection 4. Involvement
RQ2: How does the context of emerging adulthood change the communication between siblings?	2. Changes during emerging adulthood	5. Realizations 6. From "hey, that's mine" to "hey, let's share"
RQ3: How do emerging adult siblings communicate through conflict?	3. Conflict Negotiation	7. Why conflicts arise 8. Working through conflict
RQ4: What are the differences, if any, in sibling communication from the oldest/youngest perspective, respectively?	4. Taking a parental role	

## **Siblings Become Friends**

The theme of *siblings become friends* addressed the first research question pertaining to the use of relationship maintenance behaviors. This theme emerged through all of the participants describing their current sibling relationship as more than siblings, but as friends. The siblings relied more on each other for advice and support as they emerged into adulthood. They freely expressed affection and had gained a deeper understanding of the importance of spending time together and making memories. All participants described a desire to continue building the friendship in their sibling relationship in hopes that the friendship would remain strong later in life. Four subthemes make up the overall theme: my sibling/ my bestie, reliance, affection, and involvement.

**My sibling, my bestie.** The siblings felt like the relationships were closer now that they were in college and becoming adults than when they were in high school. Hannah said, “It’s definitely more close; we’re more close now. I think we have a good relationship as far as that goes.” All 12 participants described their relationship as very close friendships. Eight of the 12 called their sibling their best friend. Jordan stated, “I would call her my best friend for sure. She’s one of the only people that really understands me better than anyone else...So when I laugh with her, it’s the hardest laugh.” Similarly, Heather had noticed the change in the relationship since her sister joined her at college saying, “Since she has come to college, she has really become one of my very best friends...she truly has become one of my best friends.” All participants described the communication in the relationship as being more open. For instance, Julie emphasized the openness of communication in the following passage:

I think we have a really open communication line. If I'm doing something that she thinks is stupid, she feels free to tell me and vice versa. And it's positive. We really don't have any negative communication at all. We rarely have fights or conflicts or anything like that.

The participants wanted to develop a friendship with their sibling, but it took maturing into the emerging adulthood stage to finally bring that desire to fruition.

Three sibling dyads lived in the same town, and three sibling dyads lived in different cities. No matter the distance, siblings reported frequent communication. Melanie lives in the same city as her brother Evan and said, "We talk several times a week, but we always have been close. We've always talked regularly and always had a really good relationship." Patty lives 8 hours away from her sister Pam and claimed, "We try to talk on the phone just about every day."

The sibling participants have become closer and more open with each other. They communicate frequently, and the relationship is now seen as a close, even best, friendship. These siblings built a closer bond through their reliance on one another.

**Reliance.** In the case of these sibling participants, reliance was built through trust, self-disclosure, and giving advice. Participants claimed to trust their siblings with personal information. Emily, for example, said, "It's a nice feeling to trust someone with that much information because you really can't trust many people. At least I can't, so it's nice to have that relationship with someone." Josh said he built trust with his sister over life experiences saying the following:

Probably because we didn't have a choice. Our biological parents aren't married anymore, so we went through that bad divorce together. We were the only people

we could communicate with about how we really felt about it and not worry about what other people might say or think. We knew we could always be honest and it would never leave the room. I think that history goes towards it.

Through the course of their relationship these siblings had learned to trust one another, which allowed them to disclose information about their lives in the emerging adulthood stage of life.

Siblings also rely on each other for self-disclosure. The disclosure ranged from how their day went to relationship problems. Molly claimed to tell her sister everything saying, “Just anything, like how my day’s going, or if me and my boyfriend got in a fight, or drama in school. Anything really. I don’t have things that I keep from her.” Although most life experiences were shared within the sibling relationship, some topics were not disclosed such as siblings’ sex lives. Pam, for example, said, “I really share with her everything...I feel like it goes both ways. But I don’t think she shares with me all of her stories and everything that she’s doing when it comes to sex and stuff like that.”

Not only did siblings have trust in the relationship to self-disclose personal information, siblings also sought advice from one another. Kelly claimed to go to her sister for advice more now than when they lived in the same household stating:

Yeah, I do. I do a lot more now since we do have that space. I feel like when I was younger, I was just annoyed with her communicating to me like a parent...She’s very cautious. Now I’m more appreciative of that. I go to her, maybe for things that I don’t have experience in life and she’s got a few more years that she can share about.



Since the participants no longer lived in the same parental home, they were no longer forced to see each other on a daily basis. For these siblings, that space allowed for a new found appreciation of their siblings and the advice they could provide.

Siblings sought advice for relationships, clothing, how to deal with parents, and school. Evan enjoyed his older sister being at the same university so he could go to her when he needed help:

I definitely go to my sister for advice in terms of anything I need help with like the university, school, finding my way around, loopholes in the system that maybe I can jump through. Anytime something like that gives me trouble, I check with her. Lately I have been going to my sister with relationship problems, girl problems, that kind of thing.

As the participants faced new life experiences, they shared them with their siblings. Whether it was how to navigate on campus, how to find a job, or romantic relationships, these sibling participants relied on each other for help and advice through these new territories of life experiences. Through these experiences, siblings were able to express affection as a way of encouragement.

**Affection.** Siblings also maintained their close relationship by showing affection. Verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection were displayed throughout the sibling relationships. Participants showed verbal affection through saying things like “I love you” or “I miss you” when talking with their siblings. Josh said, “I tell her that I miss her when she’s gone. I usually tell her that I love her when we say goodbye.” Pam reported similar displays of verbal affection stating, “[My sister will] tell me she loves me. And she’ll say it in another way, like ‘be careful’ and stuff like that.” All participants reported

using verbal affection, but for the siblings living in different cities verbal affection was the only way they could express affection to their sibling on a regular basis.

Nonverbal affection was expressed through hugging or spending time with siblings. Jordan lives 4 hours away from her sister, so showing nonverbal affection does not happen very often. She has learned to appreciate the times she has with her sister:

[My sister's] a hugging person, and so am I...I'm happier to give her a big hug. I probably will, because I don't see her as often. I'll hold on to those moments when we show affection because they don't happen in person as much.

For siblings who live in the same city, nonverbal affection was a more common occurrence. No matter the distance, these sibling participants wanted to express affection nonverbally.

Although the siblings expressed affection verbally and nonverbally, a majority of the siblings expressed affection through support. Heather conveyed supportive affection by speaking highly of her sister to others:

I speak very highly of her to my friends, coworkers, professors, and everybody because, like I said, she is one of my best friends. She really is...I would speak highly of anybody that was that close to me, so I guess she hears about it.

For Heather, showing her sister support meant building her up to the people around her.

Hannah similarly communicated supportive affection by cheering on her brother in the marching band saying, "When he was in marching band, I liked to claim him a lot. I was proud of him being in the marching band. I would yell out his name and be like, 'That's my brother!' you know." By cheering on her brother, Hannah publicly claimed him to those around her showing her support and affection for him.

The sibling relationship between Melanie and Josh was a special case. Josh lives with a degenerative disability, and Melanie has helped take care of his health related needs. Josh described Melanie's supportive affection that she has shown him through his life:

My disability basically is a degenerative disease that gets worse over time...I've lost the ability to do everything for myself: eating, dressing, bathing. That's strengthened our relationship because she's helped feed me a lot. She's taken me places that I needed to go. She does help take care of me. I guess part of the reason we're so close is because she's had to help take care of me.

In this sibling relationship, supportive affection was more than cheering at a ballgame or wishing each other well on an exam. Melanie displayed supportive affection by helping Josh with basic human needs. Participants also built these strong relationships through their involvement in each other's lives.

**Involvement.** Involvement includes the networks siblings shared of high school, college, and community activities. Through these common interests and activities, the siblings had shared experiences that helped build and develop their relationship. For Molly, being in the same college sorority has helped develop her relationship with her sister:

We just talk more important, it's not, it's a deeper connection because you have your secret things and functions to do every week...we've just bonded really well through [the sorority], and my mom was in [the sorority] too, so that's really cool...it's just something more in common since we're so different.

Through this network in college, this sibling relationship has developed a stronger connection and can have deeper conversations.

Some siblings were not able to be involved in networks in college, but the shared activities they experienced in high school helped develop their current relationship.

Melanie, for example, said:

We have more shared experiences, I guess. We did a lot of things together, and because we had similar friends, we did things together. There were just always stories to tell and things to talk about. I guess it just brought us closer.

Siblings appreciated being involved in similar networks and many hoped to continue to share life experiences together in the future.

Shared networks were not the only way siblings became involved in each other's lives. The siblings described how communicating and working through tasks together helped build understanding in their relationship. Some tasks mentioned by siblings were babysitting younger siblings, completing chores when they lived in the same household, and trying to win a sporting event. Kelly and her sister work together every year to pick out Christmas presents for their parents:

A lot of times it's easier to complete a task with her because we're together a lot...so we can complete a task and have more direct conversation and say exactly what needs to be done...it's kind of like negotiating...we try to meet both of our needs and get the task done in a way we both agree.

These siblings learned the most effective way to communicate to complete the task at hand. Evan described how he worked with his sister to write a toast for their older sister's wedding:

We definitely had different opinions on what it should be, but ultimately we all came to an agreement because we were all able to contribute. And it helps that the other person that we were making the toast for was also a sibling, so we were all really familiar with the relationships with one another.

Participants felt that they could communicate and work to complete a task better with their siblings because they understood each other. That understanding allowed participants to complete tasks in an efficient way with their siblings.

Sibling participants in the emerging adulthood stage of life had good relationships that were described as close and even as best friends. These relationships were built over time through reliance on one another for trust, self-disclosure, and advice. Because the siblings were close, they regularly communicated affection through verbal, nonverbal, and supportive expressions. The siblings described their involvement with each other as a foundation for understanding each other and being able to communicate with each other better. These sibling relationships evolved from the adolescent stage of life.

### **Changes During Emerging Adulthood**

The theme *changes during emerging adulthood* addresses the second research question pertaining to how the context of emerging adulthood changes the communication in the sibling relationship. This theme emerged when all of the sibling participants discussed how their sibling relationship has changed now that both of them are in the emerging adulthood phase of life. During the interviews, the participants discussed their realizations of the motivations to communicate and their level of commitment for their relationships. Also, participants frequently referenced specific ways

their relationship has changed now that both of them are out of the parental household and gaining independence.

**Realizations.** Participants revealed motivations to communicate with their siblings now that they do not live in the same household. Overall, the siblings were motivated to maintain the new friendship that had been cultivated. Jordan shared her motivations to communicate with her sister:

It's important for me to show my love for her and that I want her in my life. I love who she is and who she's becoming as a person, so showing that I want and need her in my life. She's my best friend.

For some participants, motivation to communicate was found in the desire to have their sibling in their life in the future. Pam had similar reasons saying, "To keep that relationship and to form a stronger relationship. Distance is crazy, and if you don't keep up with each other you can lose that. I didn't want that for me and my sister."

Motivations also stemmed from wanting to keep this new found friendship strong, even through long distance.

Participants also had strong motivations to communicate affection. Now that they do not live in the same household, the siblings had to be more intentional. Emily said she was motivated to express affection because "I love her. And I'm just an affectionate person in general. I value friendship. I value relationships, and the people that I care about I want to show them that I care." As an older sibling, Hannah was motivated to express affection to ensure her younger brother knew she was supportive. She shared her reasons to express affection:

To show him that I love him...and to show him my support. I want him to feel like he can ask me stuff...and if I show my support more then he feels more comfortable coming to me with questions and stuff like that.

Siblings also had realizations of what commitment meant in their sibling relationships, and they described the high level of commitment they felt toward their sibling. Kelly defined commitment in the following statement:

To always help your sibling...I think that we have a strong family...you help each other, you love each other...commitment is always staying in touch, always being concerned about the other one. I can tell you that we both are always like that...just communicate with each other all the time. Just pretty much staying together, sticking together whether you're together or not.

For these sibling participants, being a sibling meant the relationship would last a lifetime.

Commitment had a similar definition to Pam saying it was, "Staying committed and informed on their life. Being there for them, attending functions and important things that they are doing in life. And just being there for them and supporting their every move." Commitment to these participants meant actively being involved in their siblings' lives through communication and support.

Siblings talked of how they express their commitment to their siblings through being supportive. Julie expressed it this way, "We do things for each other. If she needed me to do something for her, that's fine I'll do it, and vice versa." Molly expressed it similarly, "I feel like I show it more than I say it just because I feel like we have he kind of relationship that we don't need to say it, we just expect it. Like, if I'm having a bad day, I just expect her to be there." These sibling participants recognized their new

motivations and levels of commitment to their sibling and the relationship. They also described how that relationship had changed over time to become the close, best friend relationship it is today.

**From ‘hey, that’s mine’ to ‘hey, let’s share’.** Siblings explained how their relationships had matured, become more open, and had improved their understanding of each other through this emerging adulthood stage of life. Emily recognized the maturity in the relationship had increased saying, “We have already [matured] this past semester, and I’ve recognized that, which it’s just with time. With her having more life experiences, it will naturally, we will be more deep in our relationship.” Molly recollected similar sentiments when she described the maturity change. “When we were little, all we did was fight. Anything we could argue about, we would. But now that we’re more mature, we can calm each other own. It’s just more mature. It’s more adult-like conversations.” These participants have seen the growth in their sibling relationships; they have moved from the adolescent bickering to a more mature adult-like relationship.

Maturity brought more closeness to the sibling relationships. Heather noticed the level of closeness had changed since her sister joined her in college:

I kind of felt like there was something missing, and I didn’t realize it until she got here...I really didn't realize how important she was to me until probably her senior year in high school, right before she came here. Just because, like I said, she was a friend that I didn’t realize I had. I thought she was just my sister.

For these participants, gone are the days of seeing their sibling as a rival. Now their siblings are their friends.



Evan attributed the change in closeness to the fact that he no longer lived with his sibling saying, “We are close to each other and not being around our parents...definitely facilitated a more open communication between the two of us...in some ways it forced us to talk to each other more, which made us better at it.” Now that the siblings do not see each other every day, they have to work to keep the relationship going. For these participants, working to grow and develop the friendship with their siblings have been rewarding.

Through maturity and having a more open relationship, the participants gained a deeper understanding of who their sibling was as a person. Jordan realized that her sister needed her to listen more:

As I get older, I think I’ll understand more of who she is. Because of the way we are different, I didn’t understand [before college]. She would tell me stories, but I have a bad memory, so I forgot what she said. She would get offended; she thought I didn’t listen or care. But I did listen and care, I just have a bad memory. I didn’t realize it until I talked to my roommate...so then I realized how [my sister] felt...once I understand her more, that trust will grow.

By having this new understanding, siblings are able to have better communication than in the past.

Hannah said she started to understand more similarities in her sibling relationship saying, “I think we’ve gotten close since we’ve been in college. We see each other more, and I think we both realize that we’re a lot more alike than we thought we were in high school.” Finding more similarities in their relationships allowed siblings to relate to each other and develop their relationships further.

Siblings also described how their motivations to communicate had changed since they no longer live in the same home and do not see each other on a daily basis. Melanie shared her feelings saying, “Now that I’ve seen how much has changed and we don’t get to talk as much, I’m more motivated to stay in touch and to keep up with what’s going on in everybody’s life.” Josh discussed similar feelings and described how he wants to talk to his sister more now than before:

I think that I might be more motivated to seek out, you know, communicate with her, find times to talk to her, than before because we saw each other every night when we came home. And now we don’t have that, so we have to be more proactive in finding time to be together and things like that.

Now that these siblings have more space and time apart, their desire to communicate with each other has increased.

Participants also changed how they express affection from when they were in high school and living in the same home to now that they are gaining more independence on their own. Emily is more excited to express affection to her sister:

Being away from each other, we’ve been more anxious to express our affection. Growing up she used to get annoyed with me. She never really wanted to be around me. So now that we’re further apart, I think she appreciates it more.

Now that the siblings have matured into emerging adulthood, they have recognized the importance of expressing affection. Patty has a new sense of expressing affection so her sister will feel her support:

It’s changed since the distance, and we’ve gotten older. Just with her going through her phase and transition of friends, it’s kind of been more of an affection

role on my end to let her know, um, I'm your sister. I'm here. I love you. So it's changed since the distance and the age.

These siblings realized that expressing affection meant more to their relationships. They wanted to express affection to further develop and evolve the friendship with their sibling.

Participants also had to adjust to new modes of communication once they entered the emerging adulthood stage of life. They went from seeing each other on a daily basis in their parental home to texting, calling, Skyping, and fewer face-to-face interactions. Heather described it as, "When I was here and [Molly] was at home, we really didn't talk, we really didn't at all...now we have inside jokes... we'll text...we'll tweet something." Josh described the decrease in frequency due to living in separate cities:

It's changed in the frequency we speak. When she lived here, we spoke every day. Now it's once or twice a week. And now when she comes in every now and then or on the phone. It's decreased quite a bit compared to what it was when she lived here.

Participants had become accustomed to seeing and speaking to their siblings on a daily basis when they lived in the same parental home. Now that they are gaining their individual independence, they have had to learn how to adjust to this new way of life and maintain the sibling relationship.

Further, the participants realized that now that their relationships had changed since adolescence, they wanted it to continue to change, grow, and develop into deeper relationships as they moved into adulthood. Molly said, "I wish that we could get a little closer because I was home for two years while she was here...just, part of me wishes we

were a little closer because she's always busy." Patty wants to be able to talk about all aspect of life in the future:

Ideal communication would be to cover all areas that a big sister should. We talk about academics a lot. We talk about our goals. But we don't talk about each other's sex life. It's kind of good and bad, but as a big sister, you've got to ask if she's okay.

Although the participants were satisfied with the friendship that had developed in their sibling relationships, they desired more out of their sibling relationships.

These sibling relationships have evolved and changed in the emerging adulthood stage. Some sibling issues still remain and can still cause conflicts within the relationships. Participants had to learn how to overcome sibling differences within the new emerging adulthood stage of life.

### **Conflict Negotiation**

Even though these participants have grown closer in their sibling relationships, they still have conflicts as in any sibling relationship. However, now their relationships have evolved and changed. Consequently, they are able to practice *conflict negotiation* in a more effective way, which emerged as a theme throughout the participant interviews.

This theme addresses the third research question pertaining to how emerging adult siblings communicate through conflict. Participants described why conflicts arise in their sibling relationships and how they have learned to work through those conflicts together.

**Why conflicts arise.** Most sibling conflicts still arise due to sibling differences such as personality differences, time management and organization differences, and religious/political differences. These differences tend to cause miscommunication within

the sibling relationship. Heather attested to miscommunication due to sibling differences as causing conflict:

That is probably the biggest thing ever is miscommunication. We will say one thing, and the other person will interpret it the wrong way or not hear it the way the other person said it. And it will just build from there.

Participants will need to work to gain understanding of who their siblings are as individual people to avoid further miscommunication in the future.

Although the siblings have matured in their relationship and have gained understanding of each other, conflicts still arise due to lack of maturity due to inexperience in life situations. Patty, an older sibling, described how conflicts arise in her sibling relationship:

When it's something she calls for advice, and it's not the answer she wants to hear, of course that doesn't stick well with her. She'll get mad. It's more so the wisdom and maturity level that I have, and sometimes the advice I give her can cause minor arguments.

The participants realized there will always be conflicts within their sibling relationships, and they needed to continue to develop the relationship to communicate through conflict more effectively in the future.

**Working through conflict.** Now that the siblings were not living in the same household, many claimed that the level of conflict was significantly lower in the relationship. Kelly described her sibling relationship and stated:

When we were younger I think that the conflict may have come from being together all the time. Now that we have some time separate, which there wasn't

much conflict, but now that we have time separate, there's usually no conflict.

We're happy to see each other.

The space and time away from each other has allowed for some conflict resolution within these participants' sibling relationships.

Further, being in college and in the emerging adulthood stage of life has brought more understanding and acceptance to the sibling relationship. What once was a conflict issue now is appreciated as a difference in personal preference. Evan described the level of acceptance within his sibling relationship:

I think now both of us are a lot more accepting of the other's ideas. Coming to college has helped that. Now that we are out of the house, we are experiencing a lot of different things, and when you come to college you become more accepting. So that has reflected in our relationship in the way we interact and make decisions together. Whereas it used to be one of us was right, and one of us was wrong in both our eyes.

Now that the siblings have had time apart and have gained acceptance for their siblings, all of the siblings described how they are able to communicate through conflict more effectively. Jordan, for example, has learned to listen more to her sister in a conflict situation:

I think we learn that we have to listen to the other person. We both have a lot to say, and we both need to listen and work together instead of fighting...I've learned that she has more to say than I do...so I have to learn to let her freely speak.

This gained understanding of their sibling as an individual person has helped these participants work through conflict situations. Similarly, Julie is able to talk through conflict situations with her sister saying, “I guess we just respect each other enough to know that we have differing opinions on certain things, and we can agree to disagree.” Participants have learned to accept their siblings no matter their beliefs. This understanding and acceptance has helped these siblings work through conflict together.

This civil communication during conflict situations is different from how participants worked through conflict during adolescence. Most siblings were forced to forgive each other by their parents. Heather described how the communication through conflict has changed in her sibling relationship this way:

Well, back then it would be mom and dad putting us together and making us resolve that right then and there. So I guess this is our choosing that we need to do this, and we need to talk about it. I guess that is growing up and maturing.

The emerging adulthood stage of life has allowed siblings the opportunity to choose whether or not to work through conflict situations. Similarly, Melanie noticed the change in her conflict resolution with her brother as they got older:

When we were younger we used to just have it out...we used to think we were too cool for each other, and we used to just have it out...we used to yell at each other...but as we got older and we were both in high school and doing stuff together, we kind of got over it...everything went back to working together and talking it out and debating and that kind of thing.

Through the emerging adulthood stage, these siblings have learned how to work through conflict. They have a better understanding of each other, and now they respect

each other for their individual differences. The participants all hope the relationships will continue to grow, and they will continue to work through their conflicts into adulthood.

### **Taking a Parental Role**

All of the participants mentioned the growth and maturity that have occurred in their sibling relationships. However, both younger and older siblings portrayed the older sibling as *taking a parental role*. This theme answered the fourth research question pertaining to birth order differences in the sibling relationship. Having a few more years of life experience, the older siblings took the younger siblings under their wing to protect them, give them advice, and show them support now that the younger sibling was out of the parental home.

The older siblings took on a parental role for their younger siblings. Patty explained how she balanced the friendship and parental role in her sibling relationship:

It is a friendship relationship, but at the same time there are certain things I wouldn't do with my sister just because I feel like I'm a big sister. I kind of play a parental figure sometimes. We do talk as friends, and I treat her as a friend. But when it comes to certain things, I do switch to a parental point of view.

The parental side of the older sibling created a desire to shield their younger sister from viewing them as a bad role model. The older siblings also took pride in their younger siblings and supported their accomplishments like a parent. Heather said that her younger sister is her "pride and joy."

The younger siblings also noticed the older siblings taking the parental role. Molly admitted to enjoying her older sister being like a second mom:



I feel like I rely on her a lot more. Just because I'm away from my parents, she is so protective of me that she wants to be there. I feel like she is always on my speed dial to call if I have a question. Like the washing machine in my dorm burst yesterday, so she was the first one to call. She's always there.

The older sibling becomes more convenient to call for advice or help than a parent.

Similar to Molly, Evan enjoyed his sister giving him advice when he first came to college. He relied on her for information saying:

Especially since she went to college a year before me, it was really convenient that she was able to give me information that I wouldn't have been able to get otherwise. I would have had to go to someone I didn't already know and get that information, so she has offered me that conduit to school and all of this opportunity for growth.

Both older and younger siblings acknowledged the older sibling participants taking a parental role, and both older and younger siblings seemed to believe that role was a good one in their relationships.

In summary, through the emerging adulthood stage of life, the sibling relationships of the participants evolved to have closer relationships with deeper understanding. The level of trust and commitment increased with age and maturity. Although the participants acknowledged that they still experience sibling conflicts, the participants enjoyed supporting one another. Through that support, the older siblings started taking on a parental role for the younger siblings. The next section concludes the study with a discussion of the themes, the study's pragmatic implications, and limitations and future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

This chapter reviews the themes, practical implications, limitations of the study, and areas for future research. Few studies have utilized both siblings in a sibling dyad. This study sought to close the gap in research by using both siblings as called for in past research (e.g., Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006; Beven & Stetzanbach, 2007; Myers et al., 1999; Myers & Bryant, 2008; Rocca & Martin, 1998; Rocca et al., 2010).

Four themes (*siblings become friends, changes during emerging adulthood, conflict negotiation, and taking a parental role*) emerged to address the research questions. Research questions focused on the relationship maintenance behaviors siblings used, what changed in the sibling relationship during the emerging adulthood stage, and how siblings managed conflict. Also, the study seeks to better understand differences in birth order.

The first research question pertained to how siblings use relationship maintenance behaviors. The findings suggest that *siblings become friends*. Since these siblings labeled themselves as “best friends” or “close friends”, they could be categorized as an “intimate” type relationship (Myers & Goodboy, 2010). Past research shows intimate type relationships use more relationship maintenance behaviors as well as more modes of communication. The participants in this study used all seven relationship maintenance behaviors (assurances, openness, conflict management, tasks, positivity, advice, and networks) as discussed in prior research (Myers & Goodboy, 2010).

These siblings had developed a trust in their relationships that allowed openness and self-disclosure through communicating in a positive way. Along with that, siblings

frequently asked for advice in a variety of areas (i.e. romantic relationships). Siblings also assured each other of their commitment to the relationship by showing support of their siblings' interests. Siblings learned how to communicate effectively to work through tasks together; they enjoyed being involved in similar networks and experiencing life together. Through the emerging adulthood stage, siblings had learned how to manage conflict and communicate through those issues.

The participants in this study also communicated affection to maintain their sibling relationship. Their reasons for communicating affection were in correspondence with Myers et al. (2011) findings that siblings want to reduce uncertainty caused by a decrease in communication. The participants in this study wanted to reduce uncertainty because they no longer saw each other on a daily basis, especially the siblings who lived in different cities.

Participants also held a genuine interest in the relationship. They wanted to continue to develop and strengthen the newfound friendship with their sibling. Because the level of trust and commitment were high (Myers & Weber, 2004), the participants were more open to disclose personal information, seek advice and support, and find confirmation in their sibling relationship.

It is important to recognize the ways through which siblings begin to maintain these newfound friendships. As today's world increasingly becomes a global society, adult siblings' likelihood of living in the same city decreases. It is important for siblings to learn how to maintain their sibling relationship during emerging adulthood.

As the relationship changes during emerging adulthood, those changes could become precedents for how the relationship will continue to develop and evolve

throughout the lifespan. The practices that are put in place by siblings now, in emerging adulthood, are important to continue and build upon later in life. Once siblings enter into adulthood, they will have more life responsibilities (job, family, children, etc.) that may take time away from their sibling relationship.

The sibling relationships displayed in this study could be considered atypical. Not all siblings would consider themselves close or best friends. These participants may have given more positive responses due to the fact that both siblings would be interviewed. Also, the participants willingly volunteered for the study. Siblings that are not close and do not consider themselves as friends may not have wanted to participate in a study with their sibling. More research is needed to understand the sibling relationship and how communication may differ in sibling relationships of various friendship status.

The findings in this study show that siblings learned how to better use relationship maintenance behaviors during the emerging adulthood stage of life than they had previously done in the adolescent context of life. The second theme *changes during emerging adulthood* described how siblings' communication had changed within the emerging adulthood context. Participants' motivations to communicate and their commitment changed during this time of life. The participants no longer took the sibling relationship for granted; instead, they realized they would need to work to continue to develop their relationships.

The findings from this study provide further understanding for how the sibling relationship changes through the emerging adulthood stage of life. Siblings' attitudes change through the course of the emerging adulthood stage. In adolescence, the sibling relationship is seen as one that is mandated by parents and blood relation. It is during the

emerging adulthood stage that a friendship is formed and developed. This friendship, hopefully, will continue to be strengthened throughout the rest of the lifespan.

These participants were motivated to communicate with each other to develop the relationship, to be involved in each other's lives, and to enjoy each other's company. They relied on each other for support and advice during difficult times. They wanted to share life's moments with each other. Because the participants were motivated to communicate, they enacted relationship maintenance strategies, which is similar to findings in past research (Myers et al., 2008).

Participants also realized and described the level of commitment they felt for their siblings. They were committed because they were siblings, but greater than the blood relation, they were committed because they were now friends. These participants expressed their commitment through frequent communication and involvement in their siblings' lives, providing support (emotionally and physically), and sharing in life's moments with their siblings. These findings are similar to Myers and Bryant's (2008) eleven behaviors through which siblings express commitment: support (tangible, emotional, informational, esteem, and network), everyday talk, shared activities, verbal and nonverbal expressions, protection, and intimate play. All of these behaviors could be seen in these participants' current expressions of commitment, but these behaviors were not present in the sibling relationship during adolescence.

Further, the level of trust described by participants allowed for open communication and self-disclosure within the sibling relationships. Overall, the participants were satisfied with the communication because they were unified in their sibling relationships. Also, because these siblings had intimate relationships, they were

more willing to communicate with each other. Thus, the breadth and depth of the topics discussed were greater. These findings strengthen previous findings that trust, solidarity, and self-disclosure are positive predictors of communication satisfaction (Myers, 1998) and that willingness to communicate can lead to more communication satisfaction (Rocca & Martin, 1998). Through the emerging adulthood stage of life, these siblings had realized they could trust their sibling and rely on them as a person to whom they could disclose information. The act of self-disclosure was not a common practice within these sibling relationships prior to emerging adulthood.

This study found that siblings began to work together through conflict situations. Their conflicts also changed during this stage of life. The conflicts were no longer over what radio station to listen to or the article of clothing that can be worn. Instead, conflicts were over politics, religion, and academic futures. As siblings enter into adulthood, the challenges of life will become greater. The conflict management styles siblings develop during emerging adulthood should help them throughout the rest of the lifespan.

The third research question pertained to how emerging adult siblings communicate through conflict, to which this study shows that they practiced *conflict negotiation*. More research has been called for in the area of sibling conflict management (Pawlowski et al., 2000). In answer to this call, the participants in this study discussed how their conflict communication had changed now that they have entered into the emerging adulthood stage of life. They work through conflicts together, discuss each other's perspectives, and try to establish the best solution to their problem or issue. The participants used more compromise than they previously did during the adolescent stage of life.

Further, now that their parents were not forcing them to reconcile, the participants have had to learn how to engage in proactive conflict solution strategies instead of avoidant ones. These strategies included giving each other space, active listening, and understanding. Overall, the participants in this study have learned to communicate about differences, respect each other's individual preferences, and resolve the conflicts with a compromise that suits their individual sibling relationship. Extant research does not address conflict management within the emerging adulthood stage of life, thus the present study breaks ground into this area. Future research should focus on obtaining an even better understanding of how conflicts are resolved in the sibling relationship during this stage of life.

The fourth theme, *taking a parental role*, answers the fourth research question pertaining to birth order differences. The participants in this study portrayed the older sibling as taking on a parental role for the younger sibling. The older siblings provided more advice, gave more physical and emotional support, and were more protective. Some participants explicitly described the older sibling role as one of "another parent." Research has examined birth order and how it relates to child development (Brody, 2004), academic achievement (Hester, Osborne, & Trang, 1992), career interests (White & Cambell, 1997), and vocational preference (Bryant, 1987). However, no past research was found on how birth order affects the sibling relationship within the emerging adulthood stage of life, making the parental role older siblings play a significant emergent finding.

The notion that older siblings take on a parental role is an interesting one. The older siblings in this study took on some of the parental burden by giving advice,

providing support, and trying to protect the younger sibling from harm (i.e. heartache). However, the older siblings did not take on other parental duties such as giving tangible support (i.e. financial), which leads to the assumption that participants used the term “parental role” loosely. A more appropriate term could be “role model.” More research should examine how the parental role and role model differ. Future research is needed to understand why older siblings take on this “parental role.” Further, more research is needed to determine whether older siblings take on this parental role only during emerging adulthood, or if the parental role is assumed throughout the rest of the sibling lifespan. Future research should also examine if this “parental role” taken on by the older siblings prepares them for actual parenthood.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research**

This study sought to bring further understanding to why siblings communicate and how they maintain their sibling relationships during the emerging adulthood stage of life. Previous studies have utilized one sibling from a dyad, but this study pursued deeper understanding by using both siblings in the dyad. By doing so, a better understanding of motivations and maintenance behaviors could be obtained. Further, the effects of birth order were discovered during this stage of life including the “parental role” older siblings sometimes play.

The study also has limitations. This study lacked diversity among the participants. All participants except one sibling dyad identified as being white/Caucasian. Future research should focus on different ethnicities to obtain a better understanding of how siblings in different ethnic groups feel about their sibling relationship.



From this study, areas of future research have also emerged. With a limited sample of only two male participants, the study could not answer the research question pertaining to gender differences. Past research has shown gender differences in the sibling relationship (Floyd & Parks, 1995; Fowler, 2009; Pulakos, 1987; Rocca et al., 2010; Van Volkom et al., 2011), but more research is needed to better understand gender differences in sibling relationships within the emerging adulthood stage of life.

Future research should also examine how the sibling relationship is changed by family intactness. Two sibling dyads in this study were from divorced homes, which impacted the level of trust and closeness between the siblings. In a society where divorce is increasingly more common, it is important to understand how it affects the sibling relationship, not only as children, but later in life during the emerging adulthood stage.

Finally, one participant had a degenerative disease that had great impact on the sibling relationship. How will this sibling relationship change as it moves through the lifespan? Future research is needed to better understand how a disability or terminal disease affects the sibling relationship within the emerging adulthood context?

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research filled the gap in the field by utilizing both siblings in a sibling dyad within the emerging adulthood stage of life. Findings showed that through this stage of life, siblings become friends and learn how to maintain the relationship, that changes occur through emerging adulthood that help develop and strengthen the sibling relationship, siblings learn how to negotiate through conflict, and the older siblings take a parental role. The findings in this study are important for furthering scholarship and

better understanding how siblings feel about their sibling relationships during the emerging adulthood stage of life.

# APPENDIX A

## INFORMED CONSENT

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



Project Title: Communication Among Emerging Adult Siblings

Investigator: Jessica Paulsen, WKU Department of Communication,  
(270) 993-3548

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. ***If you are not at least 18 years of age, please stop here.***

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:**  
It is my understanding that the purpose of this project is to learn more about the communication among emerging adult siblings.
2. **Explanation of Procedures:**  
It is my understanding that the researcher will conduct individual interviews, approximately 30-45 minutes in length, during which I will be asked about the communication between my sibling, specifically about how we communicate commitment, affection, and through conflict and me.
3. **Discomfort and Risks:**  
It is my understanding that this study places me at little to no risk. The probability of harm anticipated is no greater than I would encounter in everyday life.
4. **Benefits:**  
While this study offers no direct benefits or compensation, it is my understanding that I will have an opportunity to give my opinions and experiences which will help generate knowledge that will enable communication scholars to have a better understanding of how emerging adult siblings communicate.

WKU IRB#13-072 Approval - 10/9/2012 End Date - 10/9/2013 Expedited Original - 10/9/2012
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(consent form continued)

5. **Confidentiality:**

It is my understanding that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the researcher and faculty sponsor for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and any other subject identifiers will be altered or reported only in comprehensive form.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:**

It is my understanding that refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services I may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

*You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

It is also my understanding that my participation in an interview will be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT  
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY  
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator  
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129



WKU IRB#13-072
Approval - 10/9/2012
End Date - 10/9/2013
Expedited
Original - 10/9/2012

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Communication Among Emerging Adult Siblings

**Introduction:** I want to thank you for taking time to meet with me today. During this interview, I will ask a series of questions about the communication within your sibling relationship. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or want to terminate the interview you have the ability to do so.

**Research Question 1:** How, if at all, do emerging adult siblings describe their use of relationship maintenance behaviors with their siblings?

1. Tell me about your relationship with your sibling.
2. How would you describe the closeness between you and your sibling? Can you give me an example to illustrate?
  - A. How do you feel about the level of closeness between you and your sibling?
  - B. Why?
3. How would you describe your communication with your sibling?
  - A. What would be your ideal communication with your sibling?
4. What modes do you typically use to communicate with your sibling?
  - A. What goes into your decision on which mode to use?
  - B. How, if at all, do the modes you use differ?
  - C. How has that changed since you have come to college?
  - D. What role has mode of communication or change in mode had in altering your communication and relationship with your sibling?
  - E. How often do you communicate with your sibling in an average week? Month? Year?
5. To what extent are the two of you involved in the same things (clubs, sports)?
  - A. Can you give some examples of these activities have helped to develop or detract from your relationship?
  - B. How do you feel about being involved in the same things?
  - C. Why or why not?
  - D. How, if at all, do you wish you could be involved in more things together?
  - E. Why or why not?
6. Describe a time when the two of you had to work together to complete a task.
  - A. How did you communicate during that time?

- B. How do you communicate differently now when you work on a task together?
- 7. How do you and your sibling communicate affection, verbally or nonverbally?
  - A. How, if at all, has the way you communicate affection changed?
  - B. Why do you communicate affection with your sibling?
- 8. When, if at all, do you go to your sibling for advice?
  - A. Why or why not?
  - B. In what ways do you provide advice for your sibling?

**Research Question 2:** How does the context of emerging adulthood change the communication between siblings?

- 9. Why do you communicate with your sibling?
- 10. Have those motivations changed since you came to college?
  - A. How?
  - B. Why?
- 11. What does commitment mean to you in the sibling context?
- 12. Describe the level of commitment you feel toward your sibling?
  - A. Why do you feel that way?
  - B. Do you think your sibling feels the same way?
- 13. In what ways do you express your commitment to your sibling?
  - A. Why do you express it in that way?
- 14. Can you tell me about the camaraderie in the relationship with your sibling?
  - A. Has it always been like that?
  - B. Would you want to have a more harmonious relationship if you could?
- 15. Describe the level of trust between you and your sibling?
  - A. Why do you think that is?
- 16. What do you typically disclose to your sibling?
  - A. What do you choose not to disclose?
  - B. Why?
  - C. How, if at all, does the level of disclosure differ in terms of what your sibling discloses to you?
- 17. What topics do you discuss with your sibling?
- 18. What topics do you and your sibling avoid discussing?
  - A. Why do you avoid those topics?

- B. Do you wish you could talk about those things?
  - C. What role, if any, does jealousy play in your sibling relationship?
  - D. How is jealousy communicated?
  - E. How, if at all, has that changed?
  - F. How does that make you feel?
19. When, if at all, do you feel uncertainty in your relationship with your sibling?
- A. How do you communicate that with your sibling?
  - B. Why do you feel that way?
  - C. What would decrease that level of uncertainty?
- Research Question 3:** How do emerging adult siblings communicate through conflict?
20. What types of conflict arise within your sibling relationship?
- A. Why do you think that is?
21. How do you communicate through conflict situations?
- A. How, if at all, has how you communicate during conflict changed?
  - B. How, if at all, would you change the way you communicate through conflict?
  - C. Why or why not?
  - D. What would you change?
22. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the communication and/or the relationship you have with your sibling?

**Demographics (Research Question 4 & Research Question 5)**

- Are you male or female?
- Are you the oldest or the youngest sibling?
- How old are you?
- What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
- What is the age difference between you and your sibling?
- Are your biological parents still married?

## APPENDIX C

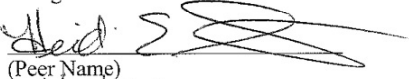
### PEER EXAMINATION ATTESTATION

#### Peer Examination Attestation

The role that I played in Jessica Paulsen's research was that of the disinterested peer during the peer debriefings as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The debriefings occurred at the end of the project where I was provided information about the study. As part of the process, I listened to Jessica's oral explanation of transcriptions; in addition, I read the master code list and reviewed the open coding and axial coding of the data.

The central purposes of the debriefing sessions were to establish credibility and explore aspects of the research that might otherwise have remained implicit in the researcher's mind. Through the process of playing devil's advocate, I attempted to probe potential biases, explore meanings in the data, and clarify basis for interpretation of the data by studying the coding procedures and categories.

Attested by:

  
(Peer Name)

Date:

4/17/2013

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.




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Attested by:

  
(Peer Name)

Date:

4/19/13

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

## APPENDIX D

### MEMBER CHECK ATTESTATION

Running Head: SIBLING COMMUNICATION

1

#### Member Check Attestation

The role that I played in Jessica Paulsen's research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

The central purpose of the member checking procedure was to establish authenticity and credibility by allowing someone other than the researcher to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the data and interpretations. Through the process, I had the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data, to correct perceived errors, to confirm and/or challenge interpretations, and to offer additional information as necessary.

Attested by: Kate Holmes  
(Participant Name)

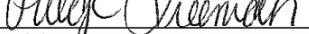
Date: 4/12/13

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

**Member Check Attestation**

The role that I played in Jessica Paulsen's research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

The central purpose of the member checking procedure was to establish authenticity and credibility by allowing someone other than the researcher to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the data and interpretations. Through the process, I had the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data, to correct perceived errors, to confirm and/or challenge interpretations, and to offer additional information as necessary.

Attested by:   
(Participant Name)

Date: 4/22/13

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

**Member Check Attestation**

The role that I played in Jessica Paulsen's research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

The central purpose of the member checking procedure was to establish authenticity and credibility by allowing someone other than the researcher to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the data and interpretations. Through the process, I had the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data, to correct perceived errors, to confirm and/or challenge interpretations, and to offer additional information as necessary.

Attested by: Haley Mefford  
(Participant Name)  
Date: April 21, 2013

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

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